INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER I

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New writing seems to coexist along with a new critical theorem that gives thrust to either "structuralist" or "deconstructive" mode of thinking. The critical theorem of contemporary times has not merely coexisted with creative writing, but it has, to a great extent, affected the latter. This symbiotic process has brought the literary scenario to a point where the avant-garde theorists write novels, and the avant-garde novelists write criticism. This indicates the existence, in the contemporary age, of a new awareness about the status of word, text, author, and reader. Malcolm Bradbury and Christopher Bigsby write that they "do not assume, then, that there is one right path to contemporary experiment, nor that a self-conscious reflexiveness, a deconstructive strategy, an art of performance or a metafictional mode is the only one of current importance" (8).

Contemporary writing is characterised by styles and modes that keep constantly shifting into various directions. Besides this, many authors, unlike the older writers, are alive, continuous and incomplete with their discourses and strategies. The author's personal intent in the modern sense of the term has practically little to do with the dependence of the text on the context. What is described as the "author" has become more of an artefact of a text that is placed within the larger matrix of discourse. The identity of the author
and the narrator is diffuse for it depends on the reader’s conception of the author’s role and intentions. Richard Harvey Brown reiterates that “first as discourse fictionalizes the author, it may also fictionalize the audience, in the sense that the audience, like the author, is cast into a role by the text” (146).

Roth gathers his fabula of ambiguities from the disparate content of contemporary reality which he describes in the essay, “Writing American Fiction” as:

Simply this: that the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s one meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of the novelist. (RMAO 120)

Roth’s fictional world perceivably shares the two general characteristics of the modern multivalent novel as explained by Alan Warren Friedman. Firstly, it has a “self-conscious awareness of itself as artefact,” and secondly, there is a “counterpointing of conflicting ethical stances, a process in which one or more protagonists participates or serves as object” (137). The actants and the world they inhabit do not appear to be of the mimetic order, for they transcend the limits of rationality and take recourse to a
phantasmagoric reality that is similar to an "exitless funhouse" or "hall of mirrors" or a "box-within-box" (Schulz 142). They go through a variety of surrealistic experiences, the mysteries of which they themselves, as subjects, cannot resolve through either action or speech. What they encounter are the intractable materials in their world and also the enigma of always being in a state of flux. The actions are mainly centered around an illusory self that strives to make self-validating resolutions. The attempts to make such resolutions put the subjects in a labyrinth of acceptable/unacceptable values that are juxtaposed against one another. This could demand of the reader a willing suspension of belief as well as disbelief. Stanley Cooperman reinforces the idea with the following statement:

Roth reduces human beings to carnival snap-shots of themselves—sometimes comic, sometimes ugly, sometimes wistful, but always without that strength of existence, that awareness of moral truth which (even when attenuated) redeems our temporal grotesqueries into the possibility of significant human action. (438)

Roth's early novels are set against the backdrop of the tight-knit family life of American Jews. The young subjects, Neil Klugman (Goodbye Columbus), Gabe Wallach (Letting Go), Alexander Portnoy, Peter Tarnopol (My Life as a Man) and Lucy Nelson (When She was Good) appear to be like a medium to explore the nature and causes of the fragmentation of modern
man’s psyche. The coercive forces of the family, the state, and literature act upon the individual subject in creative as well as oppressive ways. The individual subjects, most of whom are Jews, struggle to assimilate themselves to a life of success and acceptance, and in the course of the struggle lose their integrity and coherence. Alfred Kazin is of the view that Roth’s novels present “the Jew as individual, not the individual as Jew” (292). The communal life of the Jews in America apparently forms only a secondary concern in most of the texts. The most important of the concerns appears to be the narcissistic self that gets trapped in a serio-comic state of paranoia like situation. And so, the texts, when analysed in the dissertation, are not treated exclusively as Jewish American fiction. Aharon Appelfeld maintains that in Roth’s fictional discourse “there is hardly any Jewish philosophy, Jewish tradition, mysticism, or religion, and there is no discussion of who is a Jew or what is a Jew [. . .] Roth’s Jews are without Judaism.” Further, he adds that eventhough the Jewish subject is prominently found in Roth’s novels, he is there because of a “biographical accident rather than philosophical commitment”(14).

*Goodbye Columbus* (1959), the first book of a novella and five short stories that Roth published could be considered as the precursory text to the later novelistic discourse that dramatise the transformation of the self into various grotesque forms. The subjects in the stories, “The Conversion of the Jews,” “Eli, the Fanatic,” “The Defender of the Faith,” “Epstein,” and “You
Can’t Tell a Man by the Songs He Sings,” try to acknowledge each other’s independent self. The literary devices used in the stories suggest an alternation of imprisonment with liberation. When the actants attempt to liberate each other catastrophe occurs to them. Most of them are forced to develop their self in an atmosphere of cultural refinement that imposes upon them the desire to be good. After enduring this compulsion until a certain point, they rebel out of exasperation, become two recurrent motifs in the text of the stories. These motifs get manifested through the endless ranting of the subject who is laden with guilt, anxiety and paranoia. Donald Kartiganer reiterates that Roth’s fictional subjects play out the full range of their discord by magnifying the divisiveness “into a crisis of internal warfare” (82). The same problematic situations appear to have been carried over to the novels also where the subjects prominently indulge in monologic discourse that are directed towards an illusory target in the infinity that is never realized.

About the tropological visualization of contemporary reality, Roth makes a comment that carries a new sensibility and conviction regarding the art of representation in language:

And it may be that when this situation produces not only feelings of disgust, rage, and melancholy but impotence too, the writer is apt to lose heart and turn finally to other matters, to the construction of wholly imaginary worlds, and to a celebration of
the self, which may, in a variety of ways, become his subject, as well as the impetus that establishes the perimeters of his technique.

(RMAO 134)

This also expresses his intent of “making an imaginative assault upon” the fabula of experimental reality through the discursive space of fiction (123).

The novella, Goodbye Columbus, develops the theme of the uncertain actant making an uncertain choice and being forced to accept ambiguous results. Neil Klugman’s indeterminate and amoral ventures to forge his identity bring him face to face with the forces of a dehumanized modern society that is devoid of any commitment to moral values. Neil is caught between two alternatives: either to submit before the harsh social forces with a sense of resignation or to take on the power of reality with stubborn activism. Neil resorts to the latter alternative while trying to satisfy the urges prompted by his self. Similar to this is the situation Gabe Wallach and Alex Portnoy find themselves in. Gabe could be seen as a successor to Ozzie, Eli, and Neil. Developing this idea, John N. McDaniel states:

From Ozzie Freedman Gabe inherits a sincere, and at times naïve, resentment of limitation; from Eli Peck Gabe inherits a keen awareness of society’s expectations for conformity, a nervous indecisiveness, and a final courage to exert his individuality
despite the consequences; and from Neil Klugman, Gabe inherits an intellectual awareness of moral issues and a misguided yearning for wealth and social advancement. (77)

Gabe experiences the force of society particularly through the institution of family. The three significant motifs found in the novel are: “mistaken intentions,” “crossed purposes,” and “conflicting demands” (Halio 37). To seek order, direction, and self-fulfillment, he comes into a ceaseless grapple with the issues of filial obligation, flirtatious relationship, professional pursuit, adoption of child, and marital compatibility. The discourse in *When She was Good* concerns Lucy’s relationship with society and the extent to which she is victimized by false ideals and self deception. Portnoy’s monologic discourse could, on the other hand, be seen as a site of metaphors/metonymies, where the uncompromising battle between private desire and socially imposed moral conscience is staged. It is “the comedy of excess” where “obscenity is not only a kind of language” but is “very nearly the issue itself” (Halio 67; RMAO 18).

In *My Life as a Man*, the writer-narrator Peter Tarnopol is involved in a dialectical encounter with the compelling values of family life. The novel is more like a bildungsroman where the artist’s consciousness becomes a space to enact a conflict ridden encounter with certain constructive social norms. *The Professor of Desire* and *The Breast* introduce the grapple between David
Alan Kepesh, the Professor of Literature and the self that occupies the Kafkan texts he teaches. Kafka and his actants appear in these two texts as complex metaphoric representations of the text’s self.

The Zuckerman trilogy comprises *The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, and *The Anatomy Lesson*. The first novel narrates Zuckman’s formative years spent in the search for a literary ideal that could provide him inspiration in his career as a writer. The reader could look upon the novel as an endless regress to which access can be gained by several entrances. *Zuckerman Unbound* is a narrative that tends to convey the point that art should not be confused with life. The narrative places Zuckerman in disturbing situations wherein he has to interact with many men and women. All of them, directly or obliquely, go on to reveal Zuckerman’s odyssey towards achieving a detachment between his fictional self and real self. The narrative in *The Anatomy Lesson* is again a monologic articulation of a writer’s frustration with himself and his literary sterility after his father’s death: “No longer a son, no longer a writer. Everything that had galvanised him had been extinguished” (446). *The Counterlife* and *Deception* could be placed together by their thematic and technical similarities. The actions transcend all temporal boundaries of the present, past and future. Mark Shechner writes that *Deception* performs an elaborate “counterpoint between the inertia of history and the agility of the imagination [. . .]” (qtd. in Halio
215). *The Counterlife* is an imaginative rendering of Zuckerman’s escapades with marriage, sex, religion and literature.